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INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE PRIORITY 0214
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY

S E C R E T YAOUNDE 000933
C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (CLASSIFICATION TO SECRET)

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STATE FOR AF/C AND INR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/22/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KCOR](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [CM](#)
SUBJECT: BIYA REGIME MAKES CAMEROON "EXPLOSIVE" SAY
INTELLECTUALS

Classified By: Political officer Tad Brown for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (S) Summary: In a September 19 discussion with AMB and Emboffs, four leading Cameroonian intellectuals presented a unanimously bleak assessment of the prospects for peaceful transition in Cameroon, arguing that the Biya regime is so myopically focused on its own preservation that it would take "a miracle" to avoid a "violence so bad that you will have to close the U.S. Embassy." France is increasingly irrelevant to the Cameroonian public, they argued, while Cameroonians place tremendous faith in the USG's outspoken advocacy for democracy and anti-corruption. Despite the USG's efforts, they predicted, Biya's regime will resist implementing any liberalizing reform and will hold onto power until it is forced to give way, likely through popular will expressed in violence. These dreary sentiments are representative of discussions we have had with other Cameroonian intellectuals, who generally view Cameroon's current regime as already beyond saving, with violence almost inevitable. End summary.

"A Monarchy Dressed in Democracy"

¶2. (S) Ambassador welcomed four leading Cameroonian intellectuals and opinion-makers (see bio notes in para 10) to her residence on September 19 for an informal discussion on socio-political trends in Cameroon. When asked about the prospects for political transition, political scientist Eric Mathias Owona Nguini argued that Cameroon is "explosive" and has been in a state of volatility for at least a few years, arguing that it would take "a miracle" to avoid violence and instability in the post-Biya transition. Describing Cameroon's government as a monarchy "dressed in the trappings of democracy," Owona Nguini argued that Cameroon is still a feudal society as the relationship between the elites (ministers, senior officials, traditional) and the common people is more akin to lords and serfs than citizens of equal standing.

Sitting on a "Volcano"

¶3. (S) Charles Ateba Eyene, an outspoken critic within the ruling CPDM party, concurred with Owona Nguini's fundamental diagnosis, saying that Cameroon is sitting on "a volcano." He averred that the crisis is largely generational, with older elites seeking to maintain dominance. Highly centralized power structures and thoroughly corrupt officials at all levels of government have created a system of elite patronage which fundamentally fails to deliver services. This is the case in every region of the country, he said, including the Center and South, the heartland of Biya's Beti power base. Ateba Eyene predicted that the population would revolt against Biya's candidacy in the next presidential

elections, resulting in violence that would eclipse the February unrest and force the USG "to close the US Embassy" and evacuate our nationals.

14. (C) Economist Pius Ottou and political scientist Justine Diffo Tchunkam indicated that they shared the general outlook of Owona Nguini and Ateba Eyene, but said they had decided to focus their efforts on increasing standards of living for Cameroonians (Ottou) and expanding the role of women in public life (Tchunkam) in order to facilitate political reform.

"Prisoner" Biya Will Run in 2011

15. (C) Ateba Eyene and Owona Nguini argued that Biya is a "prisoner" to three forces: the elites around him who have a stake in perpetuating the regime he has created, his own ego, and his wife, Chantal. Chantal Biya, many years Biya's junior, reportedly has no interest in surrendering the tremendous power she enjoys. All four took for granted that Biya would present himself as a candidate in the presidential elections, whether they happen in 2011 or earlier, as some are predicting. All four lamented the lack of credible national leaders to act as counterweights to Biya's regime, with some arguing that John Fru Ndi and Ndam Njoya, the leaders of the SDF and UDC opposition parties respectively, had sold out to the Biya regime long ago and promised to be "more Biya than Biya" if elected.

The USG's Role

16. (C) When asked what impact the USG might hope to have, INTELLECTUALS

there was clear agreement that the solution would have to come from Cameroonians themselves. Asked what impact USG programs might have in Cameroon, Owona Nguini reiterated his analysis that the regime would resist any efforts at reform until its demise, but said the USG "can continue to engage with the GRC on democratization and other programs, to assuage your conscience." Ottou said Cameroonians are aware--and resentful--of the French government's manipulation of Cameroonian politics ("they choose our ministers" said Owona Nguini). As a result, they are turning their attention from France to the US, placing faith in the USG's outspoken advocacy for democracy and anti-corruption efforts.

Comment: What Next?

17. (S) Our discussions over the past year with intellectuals such as this distinguished group reflect a consistent but growing sense that Cameroon is heading into a dangerous future. Outside intellectual circles, the arguments are usually less categorical and politically framed, but they generally point to the same conclusion: that Biya is very unpopular; that his government is run by a cadre of disconnected, self-serving elites; that corruption has withered the country's institutions; that average people are more poor and desperate; and that the future beyond Biya is fraught with uncertainty.

18. (S) For all his faults, Biya has succeeded in holding together the wobbly and uneasy architecture that has been Cameroon's stability. Nonetheless, that much-vaunted stability is at threat in the long term as a direct result of Biya's leadership over more than 25 years, a leadership that has systematically co-opted or undermined the independence of competing poles of power (from the judiciary and National Assembly to the media and opposition political parties). Against a backdrop of corrupt and dysfunctional institutions and widespread popular discontent and fear, Biya's eventual departure--whether by force of nature, his own choice, or popular demand--could bring a period of violence and instability.

¶9. (S) Whether the post-Biya era is violent or the ever-enigmatic Biya maneuvers some kind of softer landing, Cameroonians expect the USG to play a critical role in strengthening those institutions that have been weakened by Biya's rule and which could play a role in mitigating the fallout from an uncertain or violent transition: the judiciary, the national assembly, the armed forces, civil society organizations, and the media. End comment.

Bio Notes

¶10. (S) The following biographical information is, in itself, unclassified, but the individuals who participated in the conversation could be susceptible to intimidation (including the loss of their jobs) or prosecution for the opinions they voiced.

--Eric Mathias Owona Nguini. A professor of political science at the University of Yaounde II, Owona Nguini is a highly respected political commentator. As an ethnic Beti and the son of former cabinet member and Biya confidant Joseph Owona, Owona Nguini is personally familiar with the ways of Cameroon's ruling elite.

--Charles Ateba Eyene. Best known as an outspoken, critical member of the ruling CPDM party and the Beti elite to which he belongs, Ateba Eyene recently published a hotly debated book entitled "Les Paradoxes du Pays Organisateur," a critique of Biya's system (inherited from previous President Ahidjo) of cultivating nationwide support by currying favor with narrow ethnic elites. Ateba Eyene has worked as a civil servant.

--Pius Ottou. The Senior Economist at the University of Yaounde II, Ottou is a prominent commentator on political economics in Cameroon.

--Justine Diffo Tchunkam. A professor at the University of Yaounde II, Tchunkam is the President of More Women in Politics, a non-partisan civil society organization seeking a larger role for women in national politics. Tchunkam is critical of the regime's failure to engage women in the nation's affairs, a failure that she argues will further weaken the regime.

GARVEY